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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the notion of schools as sites of democratic and political struggle, and as "sites of possibility." The need for building community within the schooling experience is discussed in the first section, as well as the need for moral discourse instead of the traditional, technical, and instrumental educational discourse. The second section elaborates upon the importance of moral discourse, focusing on the needs to critique existing school arrangements and develop a utopian vision of possibility. This is followed by a section that outlines a position on practice within democratic schooling, focusing on sociocultural analysis. The last section connects the concepts of democracy, moral discourse, educational practice, and community, emphasizing the need for some involvement with the political notion of civic education and the fact that democracy is a struggle that needs to be fought face-to-face. (Contains 13 references.) (DLS)

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14th Foundations Symposium: Continuing the Debates/Discussions of the Foundations of Our Field. Education and Community

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14th Foundations Symposium
Continuing The Debates/Discussions Of The Foundations Of Our Field.

Education And Community*

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The National Film Board of Canada produced a film a few years ago called "The Manufacturing of Consent." This film was about Noam Chomsky's text of the same title and had to do with the mass media and the presentation of public information. The film is a very nice critique of our conference. We three presenters have one hour and fifteen minutes to present, essentially, three different views regarding the foundations of the nature of our field, as well as allow for your participation. The key word is "concision". The reality is, concision is impossible when presenting complex ideas and positions on the nature of our field. But.... here is one of the presentations.

Foundations symposia in the past have always tried to deal with the larger questions concerning educational technology, schooling, and society. These symposia have taken the form of discussions centered on the philosophical, historical, psychological, and sociological foundations of our work. It has been the belief of those of us who have participated in these symposia that foundations disciplines raise substantive questions regarding the nature of our work. This notion of foundations is not meant to suggest meta-narratives of the "right" interpretations, representations, or approaches to our work, but more of the diversity of our approaches toward examining educational technology in what we see to be a complex social system.

In the brief time that I have, I would like to explore the notion of schools as sites of democratic struggle, schools as sites of political struggle. Political struggle here means having to do with competing ideological positions. Seeing schools as political institutions is not a mainstream understanding of the educational experience. But if we recognize schools as political institutions, we can begin to see them as "sites of possibility". By this I mean there is no one best system of schooling, and schools are places where the experience of community can begin to take place. Issues of social justice, the common good, equality, freedom, etc., are part of the American ideology, the view that America has of itself. This ideology is the foundation of what it means to build community. Community can exist only within a framework where these values are cherished.

The Need for Community

In talking about the need for community, I am talking about building community within the schooling experience. Foundations Symposia have always advocated reading texts outside the mainstream instructional technology literature. This literature presents us with different viewpoints regarding education that we can use to ask ourselves questions about our own work in technology. For example, when I read David Purpel's essay (1993) on "Educational Discourse and Global Crisis: What's a Teacher To Do?", he presents me with this statement: there is a major gap between "mainstream educational discourse and the urgent social, political and moral crises of our time" (p.278). What does this mean? Mainstream educational discourse is technical/instrumental in nature. This means that the language we use in talking about education has to do with a "scientific" rationality of cause/effect, means-ends relationships and it focuses on predictability, efficiency and control. Mainstream educational discourse focuses on educational reform that is seen as fine-tuning the system, and hence any incremental rearrangement of school practice is seen as substantive change. We keep fixing the existing system- e.g., teacher wages, class size reductions, adding services and programs, changing curricula, adding technology, etc., without substantive change in what school is about. In other words, school is teaching content, school is producing citizens.

Our mainstream educational language does not take into consideration the complex social/ political/economic reality , i.e., the sociocultural context. We have no open forums for debate concerning this complex reality. As a society, within the public sphere, we seem to have lost a working language and a desire to engage each other in substantive (moral) discourse about education. Our working ideas and understandings of democracy have become abstractions. Yet not engaging this world leaves our discourse incomplete, uncritical, simplistic. If we are to build "real" community (as opposed to "virtual" communities) we will need a way to engage each other in moral discourse. This

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will allow us to develop a language of democracy. We can begin to do this through a radical, critical praxisWhat is critical praxis, critical pedagogy? What is radical/critical education? Very briefly, when I read Henry Giroux's text Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture (1992), Giroux states that radical/ critical education is not a specific "body of knowledge", but is rather a particular kind of practice and a way of "questioning received institutions and received assumptions". Critical forms of education are "interdisciplinary in nature", question the "fundamental categories of all disciplines", and have a "public mission of making society more democratic" (p.10). Paulo Freire refers to critical teaching as an "unquiet pedagogy" (1) that acknowledges student/teacher voice in the learning process. An unquiet pedagogy fosters and provides the opportunity for democratic schooling through confronting issues of social justice, the common good, equality before the law, etc. These issues involve the characteristics that are needed to work toward the creation of community (i.e. social justice, the common good, equality, etc.). Creating democratic community requires a different kind of discourse (other than a technical discourse), a moral discourse, which is a way to talk about what community is.

Within the above discussion I am looking for ways for us to engage each other in a dialogue that will move us into areas that we can explore toward building community. My interest is in building community where we are, which is particularly true for me as an educator within an institutional setting that at times seems to be at odds with building a democratic, participatory community. The notion of building democratic, participatory community is important because, historically, our beliefs and actions toward democracy have changed. There is no one vision of democracy; visions of democracy have "competing interests" as well as differing notions of "social justice"; and because of our inability to engage in moral dialogue within society (especially within schools), it is increasingly difficult to clarify, debate or act on these visions, much less develop historical understanding. Question: do we, as a society, engage in dialogue regarding the larger issues? Is there a forum for such dialogue? Landon Beyer suggests "no". He writes in the essay "Schooling for the Culture of Democracy" (1988) that the inability of society (and the "schools") to provide a forum for open discussion/on-going dialogue results from

> ...a loss of communities within which such discourse can become meaningful and prompt the requisite social action. Surrounded by larger institutional structures favoring technization, commodification, and the therapeutic privatization of social relations, we have all but lost a sense of the collective social good so necessary for discussion of democratic ideas (Beyer, 1988, p.221).

In other words, the collective social good is replaced by individual pathologies, individual problems, separated from the social context. The idea of individuals "coping" with society masks, and allows, social reality to be unproblematic. Jean Elshtain agrees, and in her text Democracy on Trial (1995) comments on the loss of communities:

> "We are in danger of losing democratic civil society. It is that simple and that dangerous, springing as it does, not from a generous openness to sharp disagreement -democratic feistiness- but from a cynical and resentful closing off of others (p.xii)."

By civil society, Elshtain means the "many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture" (1995, p.5). She includes families, churches, volunteer groups providing "assistance to the needy", self-help movements, trade unions, etc. It is in these groups that the "democratic ethos and spirits of citizens are made manifest" (p.5). The "closing off from others" creates a void in these "civic spaces", and suggests the loss of skills and facility in face-to-face communication. (2) However, schools are also sites where this discussion can be fostered. Schools are public forums (face-to-face communication can and does happen), subject to public debate and dialogue. To take away this public forum, we take away the public discourse.

What happens when we take away this public forum? A void is created in these civic spaces, and it is filled by "someone". Elshtain (1995) suggests that

> once a world of personal responsibility with its characteristic virtues and marks of decency (honor, friendship, fidelity, and fairness) is ruptured or emptied, what rushes in to take its place is politics as a "technology of power," in Vaclav Havel's words (p.88).

Politics as a technology of power means that ideological forms of coercion seem legitimate because they are unquestioned, common-sensical, taken-for-granted views. Its effects are expressed in feelings of disenfranchisement, loss of a sense of being in control of one's life situation, and even a further withdrawal from the public sphere into the private. Thus, how can we engage each other in purposeful dialogue/communication regarding the possibilities of personal or social change, the nature of our experiences, the creating of visions that

lead to increased democratic forms of participation in society, etc., if our public forums are fractured, dysfunctional? In other words, how do we talk with each other in democratic places?

The Need for Moral Discourse

The above discussion brings me back to the importance of moral discourse as an integral necessity of establishing a sense of community. As I stated at the outset of this essay, Purpel (1993) sees the need for a moral discourse within society generally, but within education specifically because of the dangerous chasm between "mainstream educational discourse and the urgent social, political, and moral crises of our time" (p.278) (3). Mainstream public debate both within and without education seems to center on technical (as opposed to critical) issues. Technical, instrumental educational discourse focused on technical issues should be of great concern to all of us who believe education offers possibilities for social change. I am not arguing that education is the prevailing force for fundamental social and cultural change. But I would argue that schools have a role to play.

Again, contemporary educational discourse is technical in nature. Technical and instrumental forms of educational discourse focus on "ameliorating" the existing system, i.e., seeing the system as something to be fixed or "fine-tuned" but not something to be transformed. Yet the urgent social, political, and moral crises of our time demand more than fixing/fine-tuning. These crises demand engaging in a moral discourse. Moral discourse for Purpel means not only "moral analysis", but also the task "must include forging a moral vision- one that can inform and energize our political will and educational strategy" (Purpel, 1993, p.282). I interpret moral vision as a utopian vision, in which "things could be different than what they are". This utopian vision provides us with possibility. In the language of Giroux (1989), we are moving from the language of critique to the language of possibility. Without critique and the vision of possibility, change becomes impossible. Without critique of existing school arrangements and visions of what school can be, substantive school reform is impossible. This is the meaning of schools being sites of possibility.

Developing a "moral vision" includes confronting "painful and anguishing dimensions of current educational practice" (Purpel, 1993, p.282). These practices have to do with the technical/instrumental concerns of schooling, which are important from a school management position, but leave untouched the more substantive issues of school reform. Purpel is quite specific here regarding the "painful and anguishing dimensions of current educational practice" and is worth quoting at length:

> Teachers are caught up in a system in which individual achievement, competition, success and aggressiveness are essential and central elements. It is a system in which education becomes an instrument in legitimizing and defining hierarchy; in which schools are a site where people are sorted, graded, classified, and labeled, hence giving credence to the tacit social value that dignity is to be earned. Teachers are asked to prepare students differently- some are to be given the encouragement and skills to be leaders, whereas others are taught to endure their indignities quietly and proudly. It is a system that helps sustain and legitimize a society reveling in consumerism, jingoism, hedonism, greed, and hierarchy" (p.282).

Moral vision must include "the problematics and limitations of the various reforms and critiques that range from criticisms of teachers working conditions and ways to basic curriculum reform" (p.282). What are we left with? What is an alternative?

Democratic Schooling

Purpel's critical stance outlined above is embodied within the following position on practice within democratic schooling, providing further meaning to the notion of schools being sites of possibility. In the ASCD publication Democratic Schools (1995), Michael Apple and James Beane outline "conditions on which democracy depends" and how these conditions have become the concerns of democratic schools:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.

7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (Apple and Beane, 1995, pp.6-7).

Although it makes sense to have democratic schools with democratic practices if students are to be informed of such a way of life and government, and there is an educational history of such practices as well as renewed interest in the practice of democratic schooling (4), Apple and Beane (1995) state

> there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools, a concept that some consider almost an oxymoron. How can this be so? Simply put, many people believe that democracy is nothing more than a form of federal government and thus does not apply to schools and other social institutions. Many also believe that democracy is a right of adults, not of young people. And some believe that democracy simply cannot work in schools" (p.7).

Deborah Meier (1995) answers those who question whether or not schools can be democratic, those who question whether democracy is for the young. She argues that it's not a question of whether or not we can educate children well, but rather "Do we want to do it badly enough?" (p.4). Hence it will take active public interest and commitment to re-new the public discourse on education within the framework of democracy suggested above.

Meier (1995) states "Schools can squelch intelligence, they can foster intolerance and disrespect, they affect the way we see ourselves in the pecking order", and that is precisely the reason we cannot abandon public schools (p.6). In public education, students are united by "right", not "privilege". Rights are contested. This gets messy.

> Democracy is not always convenient, and rights do require sorting out. Neither equity, civil rights, nor mutual respect for the ideas of others are always the winners even in public institutions -far from it- but public schooling shifts the odds in favor of such democratic principles (Meier, 1995, p.7).

Public schools offer the possibility of developing a sense of community (schools as sites of possibility). Public schools put us face-to-face with others we might see as "statistics or categories" (the disenfranchised, students of different ethnic background, etc). Schools are places where we learn how to conduct ourselves in public ("for better or worse"). And public schools (as public forums) can provide the opportunity and practice for

> such political conversation across divisions of race, class, religion, and ideology. It is often in the clash of irreconcilable ideas that we can learn how to test or revise ideas, or invent new ones (Meier, 1995, p.7).

"The clash of irreconcilable ideas" is part of dealing with personal difference, and personal difference always makes things "complicated". Meier argues that dealing with the complicated is what education for citizenship is all about. "Ideas -the way we organize knowledge- are the medium of exchange in democratic life, just as money is in the market place" (1995, pp.7-8).

Meier rightly suggests that "Schools embody the dreams we have for our children. All of them. These dreams must remain public property" (1995, p.11). Purpel (1993) acknowledges the fragmentation and isolation that indicates a crisis in community (cf. Elshtain, and Meier above), but rejects the notion of a "common knowledge" that binds people together. Rather we need to "forge a greater share of community through a common moral vision" (p.283). This is what Meier refers to as the dreams we have for our children that must remain public property. I interpret this common moral vision as incorporating the American ideology, the American creed, which includes notions of the common good, social justice, equality of opportunity, freedom from discrimination, etc. We have a language that speaks of these values that America stands for, if not in actuality. In this sense, diversity and unity are not oppositional, but held together by a common ideological position. Here I am talking about the debates over multicultural education.

For Purpel and Shapiro (1995), the public discourse surrounding education is "...nothing less than the question of what kind of world we live in, what we wish it to become, and who are the innovators who may favor or obstruct such possibilities" (p.136). They argue that the public discourse about education, in relation to the broader questions regarding culture and society, usually have been treated with "varying degrees of obfuscation, denial, and mystification" (p.136). This has resulted in some asserting education's "moral and political neutrality", some arguing the importance of an "economic rationale for education (the 'human capital' view of the purpose of schools)," and the political right's position that "education act as a brake on the moral and cultural disintegration of the nation" (p.136).

An important discussion needs to take place here regarding the notion of structure and agency, i.e., the social context and individual autonomy within that context (the sociocultural context). While the current political climate suggests (advocates?) rugged individualism regarding responsibility for the conditions of one's life, suggesting that individual problems are individual pathologies, a sociocultural analysis suggests the individual cannot be understood outside of that social context. For example, the growth of poverty in the United States and the attendant conditions that work against individuals calls into question the very cornerstone of the American ideology, achievement and the notion of a meritocracy. As Purpel and Shapiro state

> Whether it be personal happiness, economic well-being, or social success and recognition, everything is supposedly in the hands of the individual. The pop-psychology formulation of 'Take responsibility for your own life' and 'You can make it if you really try,' he says, reinforces in new ways the cornerstone of American ideology, namely, the belief in meritocracy. If you want happiness, you will get it; if you don't have it, you have only yourself to blame" (p.137).

There are contradictory/competing ideologies our society works within. Sociocultural analysis could broaden the above discussion by raising questions about the ideologies, such as the "achievement ideology" and the notion of a meritocracy, or call upon other aspects of the ideology, e.g., the notion of social justice, equality of opportunity, the common good established through a sense of community, etc. (that set of values that help democracy flourish). Socio-cultural analysis could identify or raise questions regarding the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the global economy, employment opportunities, minimum wage employment, loss of manufacturing jobs, etc., i.e., the current economic issues of today. This could allow us to break out of a position of rugged individualism, and recognize the interdependence of the "I and the we" (community).

Let me try to pull this discussion together.

Ideas about Democracy, Moral Discourse, and Educational Practice: Movement Toward Community

The notion of democracy can provide a foundation of values as well as an orientation for our work in education. These values revolve around issues of social justice, the common good, equality, freedom, community. These terms embody those broad problematic areas that sometimes go by the name of the "American Creed", or the "American Ideology".(5) These issues are problematic because they are not fixed in their meaning, but rather open to interpretation. To inquire into these issues requires a commitment to engage each other in moral discourse. This discourse must also be open to critique. To act democratically, to move from language to action, would require that we be guided by, to be informed by, that set of values. Again, I am talking about democracy as a set of values (the American ideology) as well as democracy as a site of struggle, establishing horizontal ties between citizen and citizen.

These values must be more than abstract principles, more than intellectual pursuits, but again, they inform our work. They become our orientation toward how we talk about community. Thus, there needs to be some involvement with the "political" notion of "civic education". (6)

This notion of democracy cannot be a-historical. As Giroux (1988) states, "Democracy is a 'site' of struggle and as social practice is informed by competing ideological conceptions of power, politics, and community" (pp.28-29). To develop a language of citizenship and democracy requires examination of the "horizontal ties between citizen and citizen". Here we are concerned with the notion of difference wherein the demands, cultures, and social relations of different groups must be recognized as part of understanding what it means to be a pluralistic society (cf Giroux, 1988, p.30). Thus "difference and identity" must be central to any debate regarding democracy and politics. This means that "theories of difference" are not only concerned with representation of identities (how the "Other" is represented), but also must be concerned with issues regarding relations of power (Giroux, 1994, p.58).

Identity here must be seen as "...the effect of social struggles between different communities over issues of representation, the distribution of material resources, and the practice of social justice" (Giroux, 1994, p.61). This understanding of identity exemplifies what is meant by democracy as a site of struggle.

What this means for education is that it is not enough to read the texts of the "Other". Wanting to know the "Other", Hazel Carby writes in "The Multicultural Wars" "... cannot replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation". She pointedly asks:

> Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the need for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights, and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts? (Carby, quoted in Giroux, 1994, p.59).

This again points to the political notion of citizenship and democracy as a site of struggle. For educators this means developing that set of values mentioned above that will inform our work.

The challenge for educators is how "to expand the basis for dialogue and community without erasing a politics of difference" (Giroux, 1994, p.59). Weeks states

> We may not be able to find, indeed we should not seek, a single way of life that would satisfy us all. That does not mean that we cannot agree on common political ends: the construction of what can best be described as a "community of communities", to achieve a maximum political unity without denying difference (quoted in Giroux, 1994, p.59).

I would like to conclude with a final comment on the notion of democracy being a site of struggle. Given the complexity of our society today, the global economy, our national economic outlook, legislation favoring corporate interests, minimum wage employment fueled by a service economy and the demise of the middle class in terms of living wages and loss of industry, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and growing in numbers, the backlash against multiculturalism through a discourse of what Giroux (1994) calls "imaginary unities of common culture and national identity" (p.57; also cf Schlesinger, 1993), etc., these complexities exemplify what is meant by democracy being a site of struggle.

Recognizing that text-based media can become the basis for our public discourse and can help shape that discourse, we cannot confuse our creating and receiving texts through our keyboards with the struggle for democracy. Democracy is fought for face to face. Democracy is fought for over specific issues. The struggle for democracy is local, as local and specific as our workplace. Schools are sites of struggle, sites of possibility. As identified above, Apple and Beane's (1995) "conditions on which democracy depends" provide a substantive theoretical grounding for school practice, possibility.

Finally, it is in community, in the company of others, where our sites of struggle can make a critical difference. And as Elshtain (1995) reminds us,

> ...democracy is for the stout of heart who know there are things worth fighting for in a world of paradox, ambiguity, and irony. This democratic way -moderation with courage, open to compromise from a basis of principle- is the rare but occasionally attainable fruit of the democratic imagination and the democratic citizen in action. Democracy is on trial in our time, beleaguered by foes and bedeviled by friends. But there have always been skeptics (pp.89-90).

As educators, we cannot afford to be part of the skeptics. If schools really are the "conscious embodiment of the way we want our next generation to understand their world and their place in it" (Meier, 1995, p.135), it is imperative to know what that message/vision might be. And our generation will have succeeded in not permitting democracy to pass away as in a dream (cf opening quote to this chapter). And this must be done by the "real" as well as the "virtual" attempts at public education.

Endnotes

1. Freire uses the term "unquiet" to refer to critical and radical pedagogy: "A pedagogy is that much more critical and radical the more investigative and less certain of 'certainties' it is. The more unquiet a pedagogy, the more critical it will become" (quoted in Kutz and Roskelly, 1991) An unquiet, or critical pedagogy confronts our experiencing of the social-school-life world and acknowledges the possible contradictions. An unquiet/critical pedagogy is informed by and allows for the technical, practical and emancipatory forms of knowing within the learning process. This pedagogy confronts notions of cultural capital, achievement ideology and social reproduction, as well as the social construction of knowledge and how these are played out in schooling.

2. Meier (1995) also refers to the loss of democratic spaces: "The formal and informal institutions that were once accessible to the majority of children and that grounded the young in a society of responsible adults are missing for most, at precisely the moment they are most needed. Face-to-face meeting places such as political clubs, union halls, and settlement houses have all but disappeared. These were not only places of nurturance, but places where we learned skills, felt safe enough to take needed risks, learned to believe in the future. Only schools remain" (pp.9-10).

This is not a romanticization of the past, but a recognition that, for better or worse, our public spaces were diverse and represented the possibility for initiation and commitment into public life.

3. Beyer (1988) argues that we have lost our ability to engage each other in purposive dialogue i.e., we have "lost the ability to use moral language sensibly". Quoting Alasdair MacIntyre, in place of moral discourse,
what we possess ... are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have -very largely, if not entirely- lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality (Beyer, 1988, p.223).

Beyer (1988) attributes the inability to use moral language sensibly to forms of academic theorizing that have "weakened the authenticity and potency of moral discourse" (p.223). He discusses three such forms: First, conceptual analysis in philosophy which tends to separate moral debate from social context. This has to do with looking at "ideal types" which have the essential characteristics of the issue under discussion (e.g. notions of freedom, social justice, etc.). This form of conceptual analysis looks for refinement and analysis of word use/meaning in particular situations to clarify meaning. The end is to be more precise in what terms mean, in order to identify and correct ambiguous or incorrect usage. Secondly, a position of "epistemological and ontological" dualism with a commitment to certitude through forms of empirical investigation. The dualism "inherent in positivistic endeavors demeans the viability of moral judgments" (p.225). Here Beyer is referencing the over-reliance on positivistic forms of inquiry (empirical science) which claims objectivity, value neutrality, and an atheoretical stance. Within such a position "knowledge is to be found precisely by separating our observations and analyses from that untrustworthy social context from which, as Plato surmised, only opinion can spring" (Beyer, 1988, p.225). And, third, the university research community, as a community of scholars involved in the "conservation, development, and dissemination" of our cultural heritage, shifted their allegiance, becoming more closely allied with "social and governmental agencies, and responsive to the demands of the growing corporate sector". This had the effect of further separating moral discourse from "the production of knowledge", which production happened within increasingly narrow disciplines and sub-disciplines, while moral inquiry belonged to one area of academic inquiry (p.225), namely philosophy.

4. See, for example, Apple and Beane, 1995; Wood, 1992; Meier, 1995; Rose, 1995; et al.

5. The American ideology can mean meritocracy, rugged individualism and independence, etc. Yet there are other meanings as well. I include that strong set of values that "America" prides itself on: social justice, the common good and the building of community, equality of opportunity, etc.

6. This is the meaning of Apple and Beane's (1995) set of conditions that are part of democratic practice, especially the sixth one: "An understanding that democracy is not so much an 'ideal' to be pursued as an 'idealized' set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people" (p.7).

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